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A Tidy Spot

by Stacy Nistendirk

Stacy Nistendirk has been a resident of East Bridgewater for 33 years--no snickering allowed--and plans on living there for the next 33. She wrote this paper as a senior English major with a Writing concentration for Lee Torda's Spring 2004 Creative Nonfiction Writing class. She presented the piece at the 2004 ATP Undergraduate Research Symposium, in front of her daughter, husband, an aunt, and her paternal grandparents.

My first childhood home was an apartment on the left-hand side of a duplex in East Bridgewater, Massachusetts. There was a large evergreen out front that engulfed the entire living room window. We couldn't see the street from the front window, so we pretended we lived in the woods. When my father would decorate the tree with Christmas lights, we never had to turn on any lights.

In the backyard, our neighbor kept huge white turkeys in a pen. They were loud and smelly and messy. Our entire backyard was constantly covered with white feathers that would blow around like giant dandelion seeds. I was terrified of those birds and used to have nightmares that they would escape and chase me down the road. In the dream, they would appear out of nowhere in a flurry of feathers and peck me to death.

Upstairs in the bedroom that I shared with my little sister was my fort, a masterful construction of two tablecloths and the pole inside the closet. It took me nearly one whole day and three falls off of a chair to get the cloths to match in length. I never let my sister enter the fort; she always had a jelly smile on her face and grape Popsicle stains on her fingers.

Inside, every stuffed animal I owned was crammed into rows according to gender: Kermit the Frog, Bert and Ernie, Raggedy Andy, Winnie the Pooh, Tigger, and Scooby Doo sat on one side of the fort, pinning down the Easter tablecloth while Miss Piggy, Prairie Dawn, Raggedy Ann, Kanga, Holly Hobby, and Dressy Betsy sat holding down the Christmas tablecloth on the opposite side.

My fort was always tidy, but that didn't keep it from being stuffy and dusty like the rest of the house. My mother wasn't a very good housekeeper; it was a pigsty. My fort was the neatest, most orderly spot in the house; it was the most perfect spot. One night while I was organizing a tea party in my fort, my mother peered in and told me my dad would be going away. Annoyed by her intrusion, I paid no attention to what she told me. I kept on pouring tea. Her large head vanished, and only then did I cry. I used the Easter tablecloth to wipe my tears, tipping over my row of girl dolls: I cried some more.

I was about to turn nine at the time and start the fourth grade. My teacher was Mrs. Wolfreys. When my father left, I became very paranoid, and I grew convinced that Mrs. Wolfreys was hip to what was going on in my life. I was sure she had a secret child-of-divorce list. In fact, I thought everyone knew--and thought less of me for it. But I was also convinced that there were child murderers in the girls' bathroom. Every time I went in there, I rushed to finish, dodging the paper towels strewn about the floor. I wouldn't even stop, as much as I wanted to, to wipe down the splashes of water or crusty soap drips that streaked down the sides of the sinks. Sometimes, I would wait until someone else would go to the bathroom. In my nine-year-old opinion, two kids could definitely over-take a kid murderer-monster versus just me alone.

One day, in the fourth grade, I waited

and waited for my mother to pick me up after school. She never showed. I waited so long for her that I missed the bus, and I had to walk home.

When I got there, I opened the door to see her packing all of our things. We were moving. I ran to my room to find my closet bare. My fort, my tidy spot, was gone. She had torn it down and tossed all of my belongings into one box.

My mother's first boyfriend, after my father, lived at home with his parents. We moved into their second floor apartment. It was very small but clean. My mother slept on the couch. She never thought to fold her blanket or to find an indiscriminate spot to place her pillow when the sun was out, so I would put it behind the couch--everyday. She never caught on. My sister and I shared a bedroom located in the front of the house. I thought this was the perfect spot for keeping watch for the return of my father. From our bedroom, I could see up and down the entire street, and I would sit and stare intently out of the window, watching for my dad. One day, I was sure I had seen him walking up the street carrying two suitcases, yelling, "I'm back! I'm back!" But, it was just a Jehovah's witness. A few months later, when my mother tired of her boyfriend, we moved to my grandmother's. Her second boyfriend arrived shortly thereafter.

He was a tall man, an enormous man who thought he was Magnum PI. I actually thought he looked like the cartoon drawing of the man on the pizza box from Stelio's restaurant. Louie drove an El Camino, which he thought was the coolest car ever made. He was abrupt, rude, obnoxious, and conceited. He always took my mother out, and we always stayed in. My mother decided that she would live mostly with him and less with us, which became fine with me. He always said I was fat, and, after my mother decided he should come along on my first bra-buying trip, I never wanted to see him

again.

Life at Ma's was different. We had more by way of security and cleanliness, but we had less by way of 20th century convenience. Ma was a widow who lived very simply. There was no running water upstairs, where the only tub was located. This meant lugging hot water up the stairs from the kitchen in a yellow bucket and emptying it into the tub, then racing back down stairs for another bucket so the water already in the tub wouldn't cool too much. And there was no heat on the second floor, so that meant freezing your ass off in the wintertime. Once, in the fifth grade, I entered the Science fair. I used my bedroom at Ma's for my experiment. I froze water in my room and won second prize.

When my mother told me that she married Willie, the new love of her life, and that we would be moving once again, I didn't quite know what to expect, but I was excited to have a real shower and hot running water and heat.

In order to coerce us into liking our new situation, my mother and Willie told us that at the new apartment that they would convert one of the living rooms into their bedroom so that my sister and I could have separate bedrooms upstairs. I would have my own space for the first time ever. I was thrilled. I knew exactly how I wanted my room-- tidy and white. I painted the entire room white and hung the posters from my Teen Beat magazine on the crisp walls. (Johnny Depp, Rob Lowe, and Billy Hufsy) I made a desk from plywood and two filing cabinets. I would be starting high school in the fall, and I wanted to be prepared.

My mother and Willie spent most of their time behind closed doors in their room doing drugs and getting high. When they did emerge, they would stumble by, mumble something, dirty a plate or two, and disappear behind the door once again. They had company over all of the time, mostly

Willie's friends. They would show up unannounced and stay for days, sleeping in the middle of the living room floor, and once I even found someone passed out just outside my bedroom. Despite my lovely white room, I soon missed Ma's, running water or no.

I started school a few months later: my desk was ready. All that summer before, I would walk to the town drugstore. The first time I went I bought everything in the office supply aisle: five notebooks--one for each class--a box of black ink pens, highlighters, and a lock for my bedroom door.

One morning, while fishing through my mother's filthy pocketbook for lunch money, I felt a painful prick on my thumb. At first, I jerked my hand out, but then I went back in. I widened the opening. The purse was filthy. Crumbs, scraps of paper, receipts, gum wrappers, and ponytail elastics with hair still on them were strewn about the bottom. And there, in the corner, was a dirty needle.

Later that day, not sure what to do, I went to the school nurse. She scheduled a visit with the town doctor, the same one who gave us booster shots and scoliosis tests. The summer after my freshman year in high school, while the rest of the kids at East Bridgewater High were taking trips to the Cape and Disney world, I was making trips to the doctor. One a month for the entire three months to receive Hepatitis vaccinations.

After nearly two years of living behind my locked door, my mother told me that she was leaving Willie, and we were moving again--back to Ma's. I began to mourn my tidy spot before I even left it. I had become accustomed to my life of seclusion and cleanliness. Sometimes, I would pretend that I was a wealthy orphan renting a studio on the second floor of someone else's house and that no one else in my family existed.

At Ma's, I had to sleep in what we

named the middle room. It was a wide-open space located in the middle of the second floor. My spot upstairs had three doors, one leading to my mother's room, one to my grandmother's, and one to the bathroom. Really, I slept in the hall.

I spent my entire high school life at Ma's, trapped in that wide-open space with three doors. I spent night after night, unable to sleep, without a locked door or a neat corner. When I turned eighteen, I took a job downtown. I had to walk to and from work, but it paid \$8.00 an hour. One day, while I was walking up the street, I noticed that there was a strange blue truck in our driveway. I jogged the rest of the way, concerned for my belongings.

Inside the house sat my mother with her soon-to-be third husband--Bob. I couldn't have been happier. When she told me that she would be moving in with Bob, I threw on two pairs of gloves and some snow boots, and I began to shovel out the mess that was her room. I had plans for that room: it would be tidy and white.

Bob married my mother, got her off drugs, and got her pregnant, twice. I never visited her much--she was still a poor housekeeper. I had only been to her house a couple dozen times before I saw her last, dead on the floor surrounded by toys, papers, wrappers, dust, and grime. An unhealthy past had finally caught up with her.

After a few days of organizing we held her service, she looked peaceful and freshly pressed. We buried her on a cold, wet day in February. Her burial spot was a messy mixture of mud and slush. But I went back to her spot a few months later to plant bulbs. I raked the grass in front of the stone, drew a line in the soil to make a perfect rectangle, carefully lifted out the sod, and inserted the bulbs. I covered them back over with the blanket of earth and watered them. I knew that they would grow. I rose, brushed the dirt off my hands and knees and stood to admire

my work.